



National Gallery

Director: Frederick Wiseman

©: Gallery Film LLC, Idéale Audience

Presented by: Zipporah Films, Idéale Audience

Produced by: Frederick Wiseman,
Pierre-Olivier Bardet

Post-production Supervisor: Eric Martin

Photography by: John Davey

D.I.T.: Ashley Cutmore

Camera Assistants: James Bishop, Mark Puffett

Editor: Frederick Wiseman

Assistant Editor: Nathalie Vigner

Digital Colour Timer: Gilles Granier

Sound: Frederick Wiseman

Recorder: Geoffrey Durcak

Sound Mix: Emmanuel Croset

Assistant Editors Sound: Christina Hunt,
Nathalie Vigner

Special Thanks to: Nicholas Penny

USA-France 2014©

181 mins

The screening on Sat 31 Jan will be introduced by
cinematographer John Davey

Frederick Wiseman

Ballet

Sun 4 Jan 12:15; Sat 17 Jan 17:40

La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opera de Paris

Sat 10 Jan 14:50; Sat 17 Jan 14:15 (+ intro by
dance writer and critic Judith Mackrell)

Ex Libris: The New York Public Library

Sun 11 Jan 14:40; Sun 18 Jan 14:40

The Store

Tue 13 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by season curator
Sandra Hebron); Mon 19 Jan 20:35

National Gallery

Sun 25 Jan 15:00; Sat 31 Jan 14:40

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Frederick Wiseman

National Gallery

Frederick Wiseman on 'National Gallery'

Why did you settle on the National Gallery as the subject for this film?

The first reason is that it's one of the great museums of the world. Second is that they gave me permission. I wanted to do a museum for a long time. Thirty years ago I tried for the Metropolitan in New York and they wanted to get paid. And I said I didn't do that.

Why would they want to get paid?

I have no idea. I guess they thought that in order for me to get access, I should have to pay for it. So I put aside the idea of doing a museum. Then the National Gallery came up by chance because I was skiing and there were some friends of mine in the same place. They had a visitor who worked for the National and she'd seen some of my films. She was the head of the education department, and she asked me if I'd like to make a film about the museum. So I said sure.

She arranged for me to meet Nick Penny [former director of the gallery], so I talked to him. He watched a couple of my movies, I showed a couple to the staff. It was actually quite simple. He took the view, which I very much respect him for, that it's a public museum, transparent, and what goes on there shouldn't be kept a secret. The only thing I couldn't shoot was personnel meetings, which was quite understandable. Other than that, I had free run of the place. I got a little badge.

Did you consider documenting any other galleries?

No. I got permission, it's a great gallery. And from my point of view, the fact that it only had paintings – 2,400 of the best in the world – and there was no sculpture or other objects like that, was greatly appealing. Places like the Met, the Louvre or the Prado, they're just too big. With the National, I can at least persuade myself into thinking that I could get my arms around it, if you'll excuse the metaphor. I felt I could get a sense of the place.

Are you able to survey a venue or a subject and guess how long the film you're about to make is going to be?

I don't know. I think if I did the Louvre, I'm not sure I could cover it in one movie. It would be a mistake because it'd be too superficial. It's almost a guarantee of superficiality. It would take two, if not three movies to cover. And even then, I don't really know the Louvre, other than as a visitor.

What about ten one-hour films?

That doesn't interest me at all. The problem with that is that I like to construct what I think to be a dramatic narrative. When you do ten films, you have to create ten dramatic narratives. Otherwise, it becomes a travelogue. I've never tried it so I don't know, but my fear of doing it is that with each film you'd have to re-establish where you were and who the principal players are. If I was going to do it in the style in which I've done all the other films, I'd have to locate a separate dramatic narrative for each of the films. It might be possible, but my feeling is that it's hard enough to find it for one film.

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Is the idea of 'principal players' something that occurs to you during shooting?

No. When I'm shooting, I'm merely trying to collect as many – for lack of a better term – 'good' or interesting sequences as I can. I cover as much as I can, all the various activities. There's no time to think of themes or points of view. I collect a lot of material and think about all that later. I don't like to start a film with a preconceived notion of what it's going to be about, as it's then that you miss out on things. If I'm only shooting to support a predetermined thesis, I'm going to miss things. I like the final film to be a response to the shooting of the film. *National Gallery* represents what I learned about the National Gallery after spending 12 weeks there.

Do you know something will make it to the final film when you're shooting it?

Yeah, sure. I mean the woman at the start of the film who is talking about the religious triptych – it's terrific. But sometimes you say that to yourself and, in the end, you don't use it. In the cold light of dawn in the editing room, sometimes the affection, the feeling you had for the sequence is no longer there. It has to endure. I knew I was going to use that sequence, but it's not always the case.

This woman is talking specifically about how still images can come to life, which is a very cinematic concept. And, in a way, National Gallery feels like your most self-reflexive film – like you're entering a dialogue with yourself.

Yes, I think so. Not everybody sees that. This curator was great, though. She knew how to talk to people. She had a lot of knowledge and knew how to present it in a charming, scholarly but non-pedantic way. To stumble across her... like so much in my films, it's blind chance. It's chance, and then you have to recognise what it is you've got.

Has that recognition process become easier over the years?

I hope so. But it's something you have to have from the beginning. You have to shoot a lot in order to have choice. In the case of *National Gallery*, it was 170 hours. You go with your instinct. And you have to shoot in one go – you can't stop and start. Inevitably, there's only one rule in this kind of movie: when you stop shooting, that's when the best thing is going to happen. Sometimes you'll be shooting something very boring, but you have to continue and persevere, because it's completely unpredictable the way things are going to go. It's happened to me before and I've learned from experience.

Interview by David Jenkins, *Sight and Sound*, February 2015